

## The Mystery of that Weeping Presence

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Church of the Redeemer

*When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"*

*Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." John 11:32-44*

Today is the Feast of All Saints when we're invited to reflect together about what it means to be part of the great family of God. It's a day almost made for storytelling and on such occasions I often find myself compelled to enter into the Gospel story, as it were: to put my own story into dialogue with the great story and to encourage you to do the same, so that moving back and forth between the story and our own reflections, we find ourselves living more deeply into God's Word, bearing witness to ourselves that, truly, God is present in our lives. I wonder, would you be willing to try it with me this morning? To see what new word we might hear?

*Even now, I hardly know what to make of it. I had gone to the house to be with Martha and Mary. All the women had wanted to comfort the sisters of Lazarus, this man who had been so important in our community. Ah, but their loss was so much greater than our own: not only had they lost their beloved brother, but without a man to act for them... well, their lives were over, too. It was the fourth day; my husband himself had gone with the others to examine the body of Lazarus the day before, as is our custom. (Sometimes, sometimes, you know, they're not dead; just sleeping deeply – so after three days some of the men enter the tomb, just make sure.) When he returned home, my husband just shook his head; there was no doubt: Lazarus had left us. So we women helped Martha and Mary anoint his body and returned the next morning to sit with them.*

*But when I arrived, Martha was gone. The other women whispered to me that Jesus, the teacher and healer, had finally come. I glanced at Mary, a great pity welling up in me. She'd put such hope in this man and his power to heal, becoming more distraught each day when he didn't come. Then, Lazarus died; her hope was betrayed, and, well, it was like she'd lost two men. Now, too late, he'd arrived, and she too sunk in her grief, could not - or would not -- go to meet him. I*

*couldn't blame her....*

I wonder, I wonder if you've ever felt betrayed by God. Oh, I know, it's hard to admit to such a thing, and yet, there are times in our lives when the ground falls from beneath our feet and God can seem, oh, so absent: despite all our prayers, the work to which we've given our lives fails; the friend we've trusted betrays us; a beloved spouse leaves us; or a child becomes gravely ill. If this hasn't happened to you, I'm guessing it's happened to someone you know. Why me? they ask – we ask. And we can't help but wonder: where is God?

When I was a young woman I spend a summer working in the inner city and one night, I saw the community I'd come to serve and the people I'd come to love explode in a riot of anger and violence, compelled by frustration and powerlessness to change a corrupt political system that had failed them utterly. "Where is God for these people?" I cried out in my anguish. The God I'd come to know in my comfortable suburban home seemed nowhere to be found here, absent from a place where surely God's grace was needed most. And so, that very night, I did what we often do when we're angry with God: I stopped believing in him....

*Suddenly, Martha came bustling into the house, insisting that Mary come, that the Master was calling for her. Mary roused herself, and I saw anger flash in her eyes, something I'd never seen before in this gentle woman. She seemed to steel herself, as though the anger had given her some new strength, some strange determination. Without a word she rose and swept out the door, surprising even Martha, I think. We all followed. I confess I was curious. If this man was such a wonder worker, a great healer as everyone claimed, why hadn't he done something for his friend Lazarus? When we got to the place where He was waiting, Jesus stood up and reached out his hand, "Mary..." he said with such gentleness, I felt the tears come. Mary's anger softened a bit, as though struggling with her love for this man. With an anguished sob, she fell at his feet, words of bitter grief pushing their way through her tears: "If only you'd come sooner...." As he stooped down, to comfort her, I saw that He, too - this wonder-worker -- was weeping....*

Weeping? Jesus, weeping? Wait, this is the Son of God; the incarnation of diving Mystery, the one who saves, who heals the blind and the deaf, quiets the raging storm, and raises the dead - how is it that He ... is weeping? And yet, He does, you know: weep with us when we suffer. Let me tell you how I know this...

A couple of years after I'd lost my faith on that night of riot and mayhem, I was spending another summer of service, this time in a children's home in Scotland. I still carried within me that angry disbelief in God, but one afternoon as I lay down to rest, I saw myself in my mind's eye, climbing a rope ladder into the heavens. It was a familiar image that often came to me in those days before I slept. This time, however, after pulling myself upward, hand over hand, deep into the heavens, I stopped: I was so tired of toiling upward into the nothingness of space, so tired of going nowhere. Acknowledging my bitter despair, I began weeping, and as I did, I suddenly saw the whole round earth shining beneath me, and from someplace deep within me, came the realization that the suffering I'd seen those many months before was only a tiny fraction of the suffering in the world. I was weeping now, I realized, for all of it, but I became aware, ever so gradually, that I was not weeping alone; Someone was weeping with me, Someone else's tears were holding my own. My

little love, my little grief was held in a much greater Love that shared this grief, a Love that was in the suffering, in every sorrow of every person on that great blue-green orb below us. I knew this One now as I had never know Him in my middle-class youth. And in the mystery of that moment, in the Mystery of that weeping Presence, my faith ... returned.

*Jesus helped Mary to her feet, and they walked with Martha toward the nearby tomb. We all followed, of course; how could we not? When we arrived, I saw anguish again pass over the face of the Teacher. But then, after a moment, He called out to no one in particular, "Move the stone away..." Several of the men hurried to obey, but Martha, ever practical, whispered to Jesus that there would be a smell. Ignoring her, Jesus stepped toward the now-open tomb. I thought he was going in to see for himself that Lazarus was dead, but instead he called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" One of the men snickered; the rest of us were stunned, except for Mary. She looked almost... serene.*

There are moments, every once in awhile, when our trust in God is almost complete. When, as we move through a crisis, telling God the truth of our anger, doubts, and fears, we find ourselves, finally, letting go: letting God hold all the inner and outer turmoil our lives have become. You know, sometimes, all we have to offer God is our turmoil, and yet, in my own life I've discovered that God accepts even such an offering, receiving the gift of the mess we have made and bringing from the mess something amazing and new. We don't know what will happen, but we find ourselves willing simply to live in the present moment, with both the lovely and the unlovely, because, somehow, we do know in the words of Julian of Norwich, later echoed by TS Eliot that: "All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well."

I wonder, in our willingness to trust, do we become partners with divine Mystery? In that act of faith, do we open ourselves to life as we've never known it and help make possible something radically new and unimaginable...?

*And we all just stood there, in stunned silence, staring into the mouth of the cave. And then... then Lazarus.. came out! The still-shrouded, no-longer-dead man walked out of the tomb! Such a commotion you've never heard: gasps of fearful wonder, shrieks of terror, then tears of joy, whoops of celebration.... But, fools that we were, no one moved toward Lazarus so Jesus, laughing himself, shouted over the din, "Unbind him and set him free...."*

My friends, where Jesus is, there is Life. But we are not meant to be bystanders, mere observers of this radical new Life; we are meant to be live-ers of it, participants with all the saints, in this "feast of rich food and well-aged wine," as Isaiah has it; citizens of this new Jerusalem as John of Patmos saw it, where God dwells in the midst of his creation and all things are being made new.

"Unbind him and set him free..." is an invitation to all of us to release all that is trapped, abandoned for dead, within our own souls, within our own communities; it's an invitation to reach out to one another with words and deeds of power and hope. The Feast of All Saints is a time for remembering that this great and eternal community of love, which Jesus called the kingdom of God, is not what happens when we die; it's an invitation to live, right here, right now in our own community, to open our eyes to what God is doing in our midst.

You are poised on the brink of a new chapter of your life together, and standing together, you are surrounded by all the saints who have ever been a part of your life here - and thousands more beyond these. These blessed ones pray for you and for this little enclave of God's family. The Risen Christ Himself stands in your midst. Who knows what adventures will yet be yours, to what new things He will call you. Listen, listen for his invitation: "Unbind each other and set yourselves free...."